

It was too late to pretend he hadn't seen her. Juliet was already squinting with recognition. For an instant she looked pleased to make out a familiar face on a crowded street. Then she realized who it was.

"Nate."

"Juliet! *Hi*. How *are* you?"

At the sound of his voice, a tight little grimace passed over Juliet's eyes and mouth. Nate smiled uneasily.

"You look terrific," he said. "How's the *Journal*?"

Juliet shut her eyes briefly. "It's fine, Nate. I'm fine, the *Journal*'s fine. Everything's fine."

She crossed her arms in front of her and began gazing meditatively at a point just above and to the left of his forehead. Her dark hair was loose, and she wore a belted blue dress and a black blazer whose sleeves were bunched up near her elbows. Nate glanced from Juliet to a cluster of passersby and back to Juliet.

"Are you headed to the train?" he asked, pointing with his chin to the subway entrance on the corner.

"*Really*?" Juliet's voice became throaty and animated. "Really, Nate? That's all you have to say to me?"

"Jesus, Juliet!" Nate took a small step back. "I just thought you might be in a hurry."

In fact, he was worried about the time. He was already late to Elisa's dinner party. He touched a hand to his hair—it always reassured him a little, the thick abundance of his hair.

"Come on, Juliet," he said. "It doesn't have to be this way."

"Oh?" Juliet's posture grew rigid. "How should it be, Nate?"

"Juliet—" he began. She cut him off.

"You could have at least—" She shook her head. "Oh, never mind. It's not worth it."

Could have at least what? Nate wanted to know. But he pictured Elisa's wounded, withering look if he showed up so late that all her guests had to wait on him to start dinner, heard her slightly nasal voice brushing off his apology with a "whatever," as if she had long since ceased to be surprised by any new bad thing he did.

"Look, Juliet, it was great to see you. And you do look great. But I've really got to go."

Juliet's head jerked back. She seemed almost to wince. Nate could see—it was obvious—that she took his words as a rejection. Immediately, he was sorry. He saw her suddenly not as an adversary but as a vulnerable, unhappy young—youngish—woman. He wanted to do something for her, say something earnest and truthful and kind.

"You're an asshole," she said before he had the chance.

She looked at him for a fraction of a second and then turned away, began walking quickly toward the river and the adjacent strip of restaurants and bars. Nate nearly called after her. He wanted to try, at least, to put things on a better footing. But what would he say? And there was no time.

Juliet's strides, as she receded into the distance, were long and determined, but she moved stiffly, like a person determined not to let on that her shoes hurt her feet. Reluctantly, Nate started walking in the opposite direction. In the deepening twilight, the packed street no longer seemed festive but seedy and carnival-like. He got stuck behind a trio of young women with sunglasses pushed up on their heads and purses flapping against their hips. As he maneuvered around them, the one closest twisted her wavy blonde hair around her neck and spoke to her companions in a Queen Bee-ish twang. Her glance flickered in his direction. He didn't know if the disdain on her face was real or imagined. He felt conspicuous, as if Juliet's insult had marked him.

After a few blocks, the sidewalks became less congested. He began moving faster. And he began to feel irritated with himself for being so rattled. So Juliet didn't like him. So what? It wasn't as if she were being fair.

Could have at least *what*? He had only been out with her three or four times when it happened. *It* was no one's fault. As soon as he realized the condom had broken, he'd pulled out. Not quite in time, it turned out. He knew that because he was not the kind of guy who disappeared after sleeping with a woman—and certainly not after the condom broke. On the contrary: Nathaniel Piven was a product of a postfeminist, 1980s childhood and politically correct, 1990s college education. He had learned all about male privilege. Moreover he was in possession of a functional and frankly rather clamorous conscience.

Consider, though, what it had been for *him*. (Walking briskly now, Nate imagined he was defending himself before an audience.) The party line—he told his listeners—is that she, as the woman, had the worst of it. And she did, of course. But it wasn't a cakewalk for him, either. There he was, thirty years old, his career finally taking off—an outcome that had not seemed at all inevitable, or even particularly likely, in his twenties—when suddenly there erupted the question of whether he would become a father, which would obviously change everything. Yet it *was not in his hands*. It was in the hands of a person he barely knew, a woman whom, yes, he'd slept with, but who was by no means his girlfriend. He felt like he had woken up in one of those after-school specials he watched as a kid on Thursday afternoons, whose moral was not to have sex with a girl unless you were ready to raise a child with her. This had always seemed like bullshit. What self-respecting middle-class teenage girl—soon-to-be college student, future affluent young professional, a person who could go on to do anything at all (run a multinational corporation, win a Nobel Prize, get elected first woman president)—what such young woman would decide to have a baby and thus become, in the vacuous, public service announcement jargon of the day, “a statistic”?

When Juliet broke the news, Nate realized how much had changed in the years since he'd hashed this out. An already affluent, thirty-four-year-old professional like Juliet might view her situation differently than a teenager with nothing before her but possibility. Maybe she was no longer so optimistic about what fate held in store for her (first woman president, for example, probably seemed unlikely). Maybe she had become pessimistic about men and dating. She might view this as her last chance to become a mother.

Nate's future hinged on Juliet's decision, and yet not only was it not his to make, he couldn't even seem to be unduly influencing her. Talking to Juliet, sitting on the blue-and-white-striped sofa in her living room with a cup of tea—*tea!*—in his hand, discussing the “situation,” it seemed he'd be branded a monster if he so much as implied that his preference was to abort the baby or fetus or whatever you wanted to call it. (Nate was all for a woman's right to choose and all the lingo that went with it.) He'd sat there, and he'd said the right things—that it was her decision, that whatever she wanted he'd support, et cetera, et cetera. But who could blame him if he felt only relief when she said—in her “I'm a smart-ass, brook-no-bullshit newspaper reporter” tone of voice—that, obviously, abortion was the natural solution? Even then he didn't allow himself to show any emotion. He spoke in a deliberate and measured tone. He said that she should think hard about it. Who could blame him for any of it?

Well, she could. Obviously, she did.

Nate paused on a corner as a livery cab idled past, its driver eying him to see if he was a potential fare. Nate waved the car on.

As he crossed the street, he began to feel certain that what Juliet actually blamed him for was that his reaction, however decent, had made abundantly clear that he didn't want to be her boyfriend, let alone the father of her child. The whole thing was so *personal*. You were deciding whether you wanted to say yes to this potential person, literally a commingling of your two selves, or stamp out all trace of its existence. Of course it made you think about how different it would be if the circumstances were different—especially, he imagined, if you were a woman and on some level you wanted a baby. Sitting in Juliet's living room, Nate had been surprised by just how awful he felt, how sad, how disgusted by the weak, wanton libidinousness (as it seemed to him then) that had brought him to this uncomfortable, dissembling place.

But did any of it make him an asshole? He had never promised her anything. He'd met her at a party, found her attractive, liked her enough to want to get to know her better. He'd been careful not to imply more than that. He'd told her that he wasn't looking for anything serious, that he was focused on his career. She'd nodded, agreed. Yet he felt sure the whole thing would have played out differently if he could have said to her, Look, Juliet, let's not have this baby, but maybe some other, at some future point . . . But while he admired Juliet's sleek, no-nonsense demeanor, that brisk, confident air, he admired it with dispassionate fascination, as a fine example of type, rather than with warmth. In truth he found her a bit dull.

Nevertheless, he had done everything that could have been expected of him. Even though he had less money than she did, he paid for the abortion. He went with her to the clinic and waited while it was being performed, sitting on a stain-resistant, dormitory lounge-style couch with a rotating cast of teenage girls who typed frenetically on their cell phones' tiny keyboards. When it was over, he took her home in a taxi. They spent a pleasant, strangely companionable day together, at her place, watching movies and drinking wine. He left the apartment only to pick up her prescription and bring her a few groceries. When, finally, around nine, he got up to go home, she followed him to the door.

She looked at him intently. "Today was . . . well, it wasn't as bad as it could have been."

He, too, felt particularly tender at that moment. He brushed some hair from her cheek with his thumb and let it linger for a moment. "I'm really sorry for what you had to go through," he said.

A few days later, he called to see how she was feeling.

"A little sore, but okay," she said.

He said he was glad to hear it. There was a long pause. Nate knew he should say something chatty and diverting. He opened his mouth to speak. But a panicky premonition came over him: this phone call would lead to an endless string of others, the day at Juliet's apartment to a regular movie date, all tinged with a sense of obligation and an almost creepy quasi flirtation.

"I've got to run," he said. "I'm glad you're feeling better."

"Oh." Juliet drew in her breath. "Okay . . . Bye, then."

He probably should have followed up after that. As he turned the corner onto Elisa's street, Nate conceded that he should have called or e-mailed a few weeks later. But, at the time, he hadn't known if a call from him would have been welcome. It might have been a painful reminder of something she would rather put behind her. Nor did he know what he would have said. And he'd gotten distracted, caught up in other things—in life. She could have called him.

He'd done more than many guys would have. Was it his fault if he just didn't feel that way about her?  
*Could have at least what?*

The front door of Elisa's building was propped open with a large rock. Light from the hallway made a yellow arc on the concrete stoop. Nate paused before entering, taking a breath and running a hand through his hair. Inside, the stairs sagged and groaned under his feet. Elisa's landing smelled of sautéed onions. After a moment, the door swung open.

"Natty!" she cried, throwing her arms around him.

Though he and Elisa had broken up more than a year ago, her apartment, on the top floor of a row house in gentrifying Greenpoint, still felt almost as familiar to Nate as his own.

Before she moved in, its brick walls had been plastered over and covered with floral wallpaper. The thick, irregular beams of the wood floor were hidden under carpet. Elisa's landlord, Joe Jr., once showed Nate and Elisa photos. After more than twenty years, its elderly Polish occupant had left to live with a daughter in New Jersey. Joe Jr. had torn up the carpet and ripped the plaster off the exterior walls. His father, who had bought the house in the 1940s and had since moved to Florida, said he was crazy. Joe Sr. thought adding a dishwasher or replacing the old bathtub would have been a better investment. "But I told him that that wasn't the way to attract high-class tenants," Joe Jr. explained to Nate and Elisa one afternoon, while he repaired some tiles in the bathroom. "I told him the kind of people who pay the big bucks go wild for clawfoot tubs. It's a matter of taste, I told him." Joe Jr. turned to face them, a jar of spackle dangling from his fleshy fingers. "And was I right or was I right?" he asked jovially, a big grin lighting up his face. Nate and Elisa, holding hands, nodded uneasily, unsure of the appropriate response to being so openly—and aptly—characterized as a certain kind of dupe.

Nate had helped Elisa paint the two nonbrick walls a beige that contrasted with the dark brick and the cream-colored rug under her couch. The dining room table they had purchased together at Ikea, but the chairs and a long cabinet by the door had belonged to her grandparents. (Or was it her great-grandparents?) Her bookcases reached nearly to the ceiling.

The apartment's familiarity now felt to him like a reproach. Elisa had insisted on his presence tonight. "If we really are friends, why can't I have you over for dinner with a few people?" she'd asked. What could he say?

On the couch, Nate's friend Jason, a magazine editor who, to Nate's alternating irritation and amusement, had long wanted to get into Elisa's pants, leaned back regally, cradling the back of his head in his palms. Jason's knees were stretched absurdly far apart, as if he were trying to bore the largest possible impression of himself into Elisa's furniture. Next to Jason sat Aurit, another good friend of Nate's, who had recently returned from a research trip to Europe. Aurit was talking to a girl named Hannah, whom Nate had met before here and there—a thin, pert-breasted writer, pleasant-looking in spite of rather angular features. She was almost universally regarded as nice and smart, or smart and nice. Seated on the loveseat was a woman Elisa knew from college. Nate couldn't remember her name and had met her too many times to ask. He knew she was a lawyer. The weak-chinned suit with his arm draped over her shoulder was, presumably, the banker she was hot to marry.

"We've been wondering when you were going to grace us with your company," Jason said as soon as Nate had both feet in the door.

Nate set his messenger bag on the floor. "I ran into some trouble on the way."

"The G?" Aurit asked sympathetically.

There followed murmurs of agreement that the G, among all the New York subway lines, was especially unreliable.

Nate took the only available seat, next to Elisa's college friend. "It's good to see you," he said, with as much warmth as he could conjure. "It's been a while."

She looked at him levelly. "You and Elisa were still going out."

Nate thought he detected an accusation in her voice—as in "it was before you trampled all over her self-esteem and ruined her happiness."

He forced himself to hold his smile. "In any case, it's been too long."

Nate introduced himself to her banker boyfriend and tried to get the guy talking. If he'd just refer to her by name, Nate would at least be relieved of one anxiety. But the ex-frat boy mostly let her answer for him (equity research, Bank of America, former Merrill Lynch, transition stressful). His preferred means of communication appeared to be nonverbal: a fixed smile and benign, fatherly nods of his head.

Soon—though not necessarily soon enough—Elisa beckoned them to a table crowded with platters and bowls.

"Everything looks delicious," someone said, as they circled the table, smiling beatifically at the spread and at each other. Elisa returned from the other side of the room, carrying a butter dish. Frowning, she scanned the room one last time. A self-satisfied sigh escaped her mouth as she sank gracefully into her seat, the billowy yellow fabric of her skirt fluttering on her descent.

"Go ahead and start," she said, without making any move to start herself. "The chicken will get cold."

While he ate his chicken cacciatore—which, as it happened, was quite good—Nate studied Elisa's heart-shaped face: those big, limpid eyes and dramatic cheekbones, the pretty, bow-shaped lips and profusion of white teeth. Each time Nate saw her, Elisa's beauty struck him anew, as if in the interval the memory of what she actually looked like had been distorted by the tortured emotions she elicited since they'd broken up: in his mind, she took on the dimensions of an abject creature. What a shock when she opened the door, bursting with vibrant, almost aggressive good health. The power of her beauty, Nate had once decided, came from its ability to constantly reconfigure itself. When he thought he'd accounted for it, filed it away as a dead fact—*pretty girl*—she turned her head or bit her lip, and like a children's toy you shake to reset, her prettiness changed shape, its coordinates altered: now it flashed from the elegant contours of her sloping brow and flaring cheekbone, now from her shyly smiling lips. "Elisa the Beautiful," Nate had said without thinking when she hugged him at the door. She'd beamed, breezily overlooking his lateness.

Yet only a short while later, he'd acclimated. Hannah had complimented her apartment. "I hate it," Elisa responded. "It's small, and it's laid out poorly. The fixtures are *incredibly* cheap." Then a quick smile: "Thank you, though."

The familiar hint of whine in Elisa's voice brought back to Nate an equally familiar cocktail of guilt and pity and dread. Also sheer annoyance—that spoiled, ill-tempered quality about her. Her prettiness became an irritant, a Calypso-like lure to entrap him, *again*.

Besides, as he poked at his chicken with his fork, Nate noticed the pores on Elisa's nose and a bit of acne atop her forehead, near her hairline, flaws so minor that it would be ungentlemanly to notice them on most women. But on Elisa, whose prettiness seemed to demand that she be judged on some Olympian scale of perfect beauty, these imperfections seemed, irrationally, like failures of will or judgment on her part.

“What are you working on these days?” she asked him as a bowl of potatoes was passed around for the second time.

Nate dabbed his mouth with a napkin. “Just an essay.”

Elisa’s round eyes and cocked head implored him to elaborate.

“It’s about how one of the privileges of being elite is that we outsource the act of exploitation,” he said, glancing at Jason, seated diagonally from him.

The idea for this essay was a bit hazy, and Nate dreaded sounding naive, like the person he’d been in his early twenties, before he’d learned that writing ambitiously, about big or serious subjects, was a privilege magazines granted only to people who’d already made it. But he had recently written a book. He had received a significant advance for it, and even though publication was still many months away, the book had already generated quite a bit of publicity. If he hadn’t yet made it, he was getting closer.

“We get other people to do things that we’re too morally thin-skinned to do ourselves,” Nate said with more conviction. “Conscience is the ultimate luxury.”

“You mean that it’s almost entirely working-class people who join the army and that sort of thing?” Jason said loudly enough that all other conversation ceased. He reached for a slice of baguette from a butcher block. “Can you pass the butter?” he asked Hannah, before turning back to Nate expectantly.

Jason’s curls were tamped down with a glistening ointment. He had the aspect of a diabolical cherub.

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind,” Nate said. “I mean—”

“I think you’re absolutely right, Nate,” Aurit broke in, wielding her fork like a pointer. “I think Americans in general are too removed from all the ugliness that goes into safeguarding so-called normal life.”

“That’s the Israeli perspective, of course—” Jason began.

“That’s offensive, Jason,” Aurit said. “It’s not only reductive but racist—”

“It *is* offensive,” Nate agreed. “But I’m actually not so much interested in security issues as day-to-day life, the ways we protect ourselves from feeling complicit in the economic exploitation that goes on all around us. Take Whole Foods. Half of what you pay for when you shop there is the privilege of feeling ethically pure.” He set his wine glass on the table and began gesturing with his arms. “Or consider the Mexican guy the landlord pays to put the trash in front of our buildings twice a week. We wouldn’t exploit him ourselves, but on some level we know the guy is an illegal immigrant who doesn’t even get minimum wage.”

“Joe Jr. does the trash himself,” Elisa said. “But he’s really cheap.”

“Is there a difference between being ‘racist’ and ‘racist’?” Elisa’s college friend asked.

“Same with the guys who deliver our pizza and make our sandwiches,” Nate continued. He knew that he was violating an implicit rule of dinner party etiquette. Conversation was supposed to be ornamental, aimed to amuse. One wasn’t supposed to be invested in the content of what was said, only the tone. But for the moment he didn’t care. “We don’t exploit them ourselves,” he said. “No, we hire someone, a middleman, usually a small business owner, to do it, so we don’t have to feel bad. But we still take advantage of their cheap labor, even as we prattle on about our liberalism—how great the New Deal was, the eight-hour workday, the minimum wage. Our only complaint—in theory—is that it didn’t go far enough.”

“Excuse me, Nate.” Aurit held up an empty wine bottle. “Should we open another?”

“Joe does hire Mexicans to renovate,” Elisa said in a tipsily thoughtful voice as she walked to the cabinet by the door. Atop it stood several wine bottles whose necks poked out of colorful plastic bags. They had of course been brought by the other guests. Nate recognized the lime-green packaging of the Tangled Vine, his own neighborhood wine store. This seemed to make his failure worse. He had meant to pick up a bottle on the way over.

Elisa selected a red and returned to her seat. “Can someone open it?” she asked before turning to Nate. “Sorry, Nate. Go on.”

Nate had lost the thread of his argument.

Hannah took the bottle from Elisa. “You were saying that we benefit from exploitation but pretend our hands are clean,” she said helpfully as Elisa handed her a tarnished copper corkscrew that looked old enough to have accompanied Lewis and Clark on their westward journey. One of Elisa’s “heirlooms,” no doubt. “I think—” Hannah started to say.

“Right,” Nate said. “*Right*.”

His argument came back to him at once. “You know how you read a Dickens novel where these eight-year-old boys work in factories or beg on the streets? And you wonder why didn’t anyone give a fuck? Well, we aren’t so different. We’ve just gotten better at hiding it—from ourselves most of all. People back then at least justified their behavior by admitting to their contempt for the poor.”

Jason addressed the banker. “If you haven’t already noticed, young Nate here suffers from a particularly acute case of liberal guilt.”

Jason was currently working on an article about the obesity epidemic, to be called “Don’t Let Them Eat Cake.”

Before Nate could respond, Hannah turned to him. She was cradling the wine bottle in one arm and gingerly twisting the ludicrous corkscrew with the other. “When people voluntarily pay more to shop at Whole Foods, aren’t they, by your logic, trying to be responsible?” she asked. “Aren’t they paying more so as *not* to take advantage of cheap labor?”

“Absolutely,” Nate said appreciatively. (Someone, it seemed, was actually listening.) “But do those marked-up prices really benefit anyone other than Whole Foods shareholders? All they have to do is put some picture of an earnest lesbian couple on a cereal box and we just assume it comes from some free-love workers’ paradise. It’s in our self-interest to think so because it allows us to buy good conscience, just like we buy everything else.” He paused before concluding. “It’s basically a Marxian argument, about the inexorability of exploitation under capitalism.”

Aurit frowned. “Who’s this essay for, Nate?”

“I don’t know yet,” Nate said. “I want to write it before I start worrying about whether it will advance my career.”

Aurit scrutinized him the way a doctor studies a protuberance he suspects is malignant. “Also, don’t people shop at Whole Foods because the food is healthier?”

The wine bottle whooshed as Hannah removed the cork.

"I think your idea sounds interesting," Elisa said.

Elisa, Nate thought, was being extremely, even uncharacteristically, nice to him. Maybe they really were, as she had said, turning a corner?

"I think it sounds interesting as well," said the guy half of the couple, whose name, Kevin or Devon, Nate had by now also forgotten but who had, Nate noticed, found his voice as the wine began flowing more freely. "I haven't heard anyone call an idea Marxist and mean it as a good thing in a long time," he said as Elisa "refreshed" his glass. "Not since college."

Nate nudged his own glass into Elisa's line of sight.

While she poured, chair legs scraped the floorboards, ice cubes cracked between molars, and silverware clattered against plates. Nate scanned the books on Elisa's shelf. Her collection was impressive, suggestive of seriousness and good taste. The chick lit and the women's magazines, she kept in the bedroom.

"So, what *is* the difference between racialism and racism?" Kevin/Devon's girlfriend finally asked.

"Racialism," Aurit began enthusiastically, "is not so much dislike or prejudice against a group but the—"

"Hey, guess who I heard got a four-hundred-thousand-dollar book advance?" Jason interrupted. Out of courtesy to Aurit, no one responded.

"—attribution of personal qualities or"—Aurit looked pointedly at Jason—"beliefs to a person's membership in—"

"Greer Cohen," Jason finished.

"—a racial group." Aurit's words were orphans. She grimaced when she heard Greer's name. Even Hannah, who had indeed struck Nate this evening as nice as well as smart, raised her eyebrows.

"Good for Greer," Elisa said, like some kind of Stepford hostess whose good manners extend even to those who aren't present.

"Who's Greer Cohen?"

"A writer. Of sorts," Aurit said to Kevin/Devon and his lawyer girlfriend.

Nate's friends then began offering up various, mostly uncharitable assessments of Greer's talent and speculating about whom she'd slept with and whom she'd merely flirted with.

"I do think she's a good writer," Hannah conceded.

"It's not so much her writing I object to," Aurit said. "It's her willingness to trade on her sexuality and call it feminism."

Nate leaned back in his chair and stretched his legs under the table. He felt no inclination to join in. He, too, had recently received a sizable book advance (though nowhere near four hundred thousand dollars). He could afford to be magnanimous.

His glass was empty again. The open wine bottle was on the far side of a vast, primitive-looking wooden salad bowl. He pivoted to reach for it, and as he turned, his torso momentarily blocked out everyone but



him and Elisa. She met his eye and gave him one of her sultry looks, tilting her face bashfully downward and smiling a little lopsided smile that was peculiarly suggestive, the shy but flirtatious look a woman might wear when she confessed to some slightly offbeat sexual fantasy.

Nate's body tensed. He became panicky and hyperalert. He felt, he imagined, like a soldier who had been having a rollicking time on guard duty until he heard the crackle of approaching gunfire. Previous reports of improving conditions had proved false. Situation on the front was actually bad, very bad.

The wine made glugging sounds as it hurried out of the bottle and splashed against the fishbowl contours of his glass.

"Careful, buddy," Jason said and laughed. Nate ignored him. He needed fortification for later, when, he was now certain, Elisa would keep him back after the others left, insisting they needed to "talk." Ill-conceived advances would lead to a reprise of old accusations. The night would end as their nights so often had, in tears.

He exhaled loudly. An ex-girlfriend—not Elisa—once told him he was a histrionic breather.

When he looked toward the cabinet near the door to make sure there was another bottle of wine on reserve, he thought he felt something brush his leg, near his kneecap. He made the mistake of turning to investigate.

Elisa coyly withdrew her fingertips.

Nate bolted out of his chair and, as if overcome by a sudden and maniacal desire to study its contents more minutely, made for the bookcase. Borges, Boswell, Bulgakov. He ran a finger along their spines, most marked with yellow "used" stickers from the Brown bookstore.

When he dared to look up, careful to avoid the part of the room containing Elisa, he saw Hannah silhouetted in the kitchen doorway. She was wearing a blue top and narrow skirt. She really did have a nice, slim figure. She was carrying a stack of dishes and had turned partly back to respond to something someone said. She laughed, a real laugh, hearty and open-mouthed.

As it subsided, Hannah's eyes met his. She smiled. It was a friendly smile, a sane smile, perhaps the last he'd see tonight. He wondered if she was dating anyone.

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